

Rasenna: Journal of the Center for Etruscan Studies

Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 5

2009

Review of Vedia Izzet, The Archaeology of Etruscan Society

Eric Poehler

University of Massachusetts Amherst, epoehler@classics.umass.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/rasenna>

Recommended Citation

Poehler, Eric (2009) "Review of Vedia Izzet, The Archaeology of Etruscan Society," *Rasenna: Journal of the Center for Etruscan Studies*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/rasenna/vol2/iss1/5>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the CES Electronic Resources at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Rasenna: Journal of the Center for Etruscan Studies by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

The Archaeology of Etruscan Society. By Vedia Izzet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. 320. ISBN 978-0-521-85877-9. \$99.00.

Reviewed by ERIC POEHLER, *University of Massachusetts Amherst*

Synthetic treatments of an entire ancient society, even if approached through a limited set of material remains, are as rare as they are ambitious in modern scholarship. Vedia Izzet sets no less ambitious a purpose for her aptly titled work, *The Archaeology of Etruscan Society*. Her thesis is boldly laid out on the first page: “This book aims to examine these changes [of the late 6th century] in Etruscan material culture. It brings together different aspects of Etruscan archaeology within a single analytical framework.” Five classes of material — mirrors, tombs, sanctuaries, houses, and cities — serve as case studies and represent five categories of Etruscan cognitive structures — artistic, artifactual, architectural, spatial, and urbanistic — with which Izzet attempts to build a unified image of Etruscan social identity. The “single analytical framework” she refers to is the concept of ‘surface’: those few planes of physical externality possessed by all (solid) materials with which we interact, especially as viewers. A bold sense of purpose and a complex means of achieving it are laid at the reader’s feet in the first five pages. To review Izzet’s work and assess her arguments, I first summarize and comment on each chapter before discussing a few themes present throughout the book that deserve greater scrutiny.

In Chapter One Izzet describes the ways in which Etruscan archaeology has suffered for its position within the Classical tradition as intermediary between Greek and Roman civilizations. She encapsulates this problem in a particularly pithy line, adapting an old trope with new poignancy, calling Etruscan archaeology “the handmaiden to someone else’s history” (15). Such an inconsistency of focus has produced an equally unbalanced material record, biased towards funerary evidence and spectacular artistic finds. The absence of more complete and consistent data sets and the multiplicity of motivations that uncovered what is available drive Izzet to construct a robust theoretical foundation to replace the uneven empirical foundation. Drawing on sociological and anthropological concepts, most notably Bourdieu’s *habitus* and Giddens’ structuration theory,¹ Izzet outlines and critiques four models of change: (1) linear evolution, from simple to complex; (2) change for technical advantage; (3) adoption of ‘superior’ material forms through “Hellenization” or “Orientalization”; and (4) matching social change with material change, but

¹ Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1979. One gap in the theoretical discussion is Materialization Theory; see DeMarrais, Castillo & Earle 1996 and Earle 1997.

leaving the cause unexplained. For Izzet, these models suffer from the same flaws, namely that they deny the agency of ancient people in the construction of their own world and ignore the generative power of previous choice to influence future choice.

In place of these models of change, Izzet sets forth the concept of 'surface'. More than merely defining shape, however, 'surface' is put forward as an "axis of coherence" (30, 33) that serves to make comparable objects separated by exclusive typologies of material, form or methodology. 'Surface' is also identified as the point of transference for and transformation of meaning. Human beings shape surfaces and create boundaries with the intent to embody ideas while viewers decode those ideas through analogies of their own experience. It is this singular locus of signification that makes 'surface' so compelling for Izzet because it permits the inclusion of any kind of material without contradiction — from mirrors to cities — and provides a series of implicit scales for their examination: plain to elaborate, smaller to larger, circular to rectilinear, simple to complex, and sparse to dense.

The subsequent chapters take this theoretical platform as their point of departure on the way to examining specific categories of Etruscan material culture. The 'surface' of Etruscan mirrors is the subject of chapter two. Because mirrors have been treated traditionally as if only surfaces for images rather than as complete artifacts, the chapter begins with an informative historiography of mirrors. Izzet calls for a stronger concern for their function and for the context of recovery. It is surprising then that after a lengthy foray into theoretical aspects of funerary archaeology, the adornment of the human body, gender and identity, the methodology for the chapter is described as an "iconographic analysis of the ways in which the adornment of men and women was used to negotiate changing attitudes towards gender identities" (59). To accomplish this, Izzet divides the corpus of images on mirrors into seven categories: (1) adornment; (2) Turan: seduction and eroticism; (3) Elina and the 'male-gaze'; (4) objectification; (5) viewing the male body; (6) athleticism; and (7) warfare. These categories are then considered together with the use of the mirror to explore how these objects and the images on them functioned to increase gender distinctions in late Archaic and early Classical Etruscan society.

Izzet's examination of the mirrors in each category is subtle and intriguing, revealing the depth of her knowledge of both the objects and the theories with which to interpret them. Nevertheless, I have some concerns. Apart from the fact that her "iconographic analysis" may better be described as a semiotic study of

gender,² the sentence quoted in the preceding paragraph is remarkable because it is one of the few explicit statements of method in the book. The problem of methodological transparency is discussed in more detail below and is no doubt a by-product of the poor quality of the archaeological data. A greater concern is the nearly complete lack of numerical or chronological control over that data. The reader is never told the number of mirrors by which each category is represented so that one might understand the relative strength of the individual interpretations. A table is conspicuously absent. The figures are also problematic. Although the images are illustrative of her categories, Izzet fails to give a date for seven of her ten illustrations³ and when dates are given for the many non-illustrated examples, they largely post-date the transformative period of the late 6th century BCE.

Chapter three expands the focus to tomb forms and, in particular, the surfaces and boundaries they possess. Once again, Izzet begins by constructing a theoretical platform for her inquiry. In this case, it is the role of the constructed environment to embody and convey information about Etruscan society. Deftly, her theory becomes her thesis, for “if tomb architecture expresses the difference between the living and the dead, changes in architectural form can be seen to express changes in the ontological relationships between the living and the dead” (88). The metrics for these changes are the treatment of the tomb’s entrance, its internal arrangement of chambers, and the location of architectural decoration. Izzet argues that in the centuries leading up to ca. 530 BCE an important trend in funerary architecture was the decrease in length of the entrance corridor, affecting a change in the “mediative distance” between the living and the dead. As this distance was reduced, increasing anxiety about the proximity to the dead was mediated in a new manner, specifically by the elaboration of the tomb’s surface through external decoration. While the tomb diminished in size and the exterior detail increased, the interior space vacillated from a single chamber, deep within a mound to a tripartite space before returning to a single room that opened directly into the realm of the living. The form of the cemetery itself also finds new unity through the change in tomb

² Rather than strictly tracing the development of the images on mirrors and their subject matter (iconography), this study is more interested in how those images generate and convey meaning as signs (semiotics). For definitions of these terms and detailed discussions on their application in art history, see Preziosi 1998.

³ There are no dates given for figures 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.6, 2.8a,b, 2.9, and 2.10. Figure 2.4 is dated to the 4th century BCE. Figure 2.5 is possibly dated by reference in a sentence about how “archaic mirrors demonstrate ornateness of Etruscan women's adornment” (69). Figure 2.7 is labeled “archaic”.

shape to small (compared to earlier tumuli) cubes that created a unified, linear façade, further linked by a shared cornice running across a row of tombs.

Izzet has advanced the discussion of an interesting and important trend in Etruscan society. Moreover, the concept of 'surface' is clearly illustrated in these examples and that gives the reader some confidence in its utility. Unfortunately, the lack of transparency in the data undermines the attempt. For example, the reader is told that the Banditaccia cemetery at Cerveteri forms the basis for the present case study and several justifiable reasons are given. Material from several other sites, however, is continually interjected, weakening the standards of comparability implicitly set up by naming a single cemetery. Indeed, seven of the thirteen illustrations in this chapter are of tombs outside of Cerveteri. One illustration, Chart 3.1 (the only chart in the book), magnifies rather than solves the problems of the clarity of evidence. Not only is the number of tombs in each time period not reported, these temporal categories are of differing lengths and in one case, the time periods overlap.

Izzet is more successful in tackling such problems in her discussion of Etruscan sanctuaries (Chapter 4). Even though only about a quarter of Etruscan temples have been excavated, Izzet rightly insists that incomplete data should not prevent us from attempting to understand the material available. The chapter begins with background to the study of Etruscan temples followed by a discussion of temple form (base, columns and steps) and decoration (plaques, antefixes and sculpture). As she did with tomb architecture, Izzet argues that temples have witnessed a decorative transformation that emphasizes the surface of the temple, supporting long understood architectural concepts of axuality, centrality and frontality. By examining the location and themes of decoration rather than ornateness alone Izzet demonstrates a growing interest on the part of Etruscans in establishing the boundaries of the sacred and the profane. Particularly intriguing is the discussion of the imagery of liminal creatures (e.g., gorgons, maenads, satyrs) that are neither completely human nor divine, which serve to signal the exterior of the temple as the point of transition between the realms of gods and mortals.

Chapter five begins with a discussion of the theoretical approaches to domestic space before turning to the forms of houses, which Izzet divides into six categories of archaeological evidence: (1) shape; (2) materials; (3) courtyards; (4) internal structure; (5) entrances; and (6) external appearance. By examining the changes within these categories between the 8th and 4th centuries BCE, the transformation of Etruscan domestic architecture is detailed. These changes are identified as: from curvilinear to rectilinear, from wattle and daub to cut stone, from shared external spaces to bounded internal courtyards, from a single room

to a complex arrangement of many rooms, from the placement of the entrance on the long side of a building to the short side, and from decorated to undecorated. Izzet argues that these changes are the “specific means of expression selected by late sixth-century builders [which] should be seen as part of the dialectic of the creation of boundaries through the manipulation of the external surface of the domestic unit” (164).

There is, however, a problem with the preceding quote. It is not how the surface of a house can express and generate cultural expectations. Such an idea is well established theoretically and described clearly at the beginning of the chapter. Rather it is the ‘when’ and the ‘why’ that are at issue. Izzet addresses the many lacunae in the evidence for Etruscan domestic space, but then offers an unconvincing statement about how such imprecision will be handled. “Unlike previous studies, a strictly chronological approach will not be followed here; instead, different elements of domestic architecture will be examined through time in order to demonstrate changes in attitudes to domestic space, and to emphasize the increasing boundedness of space, and the importance of surface as a means of expressing this from the late sixth century onwards” (147). It is unclear how dividing the house into separate parts and examining them “through time” overcomes the problems that exist in a “strictly chronological approach”. Moreover, the major transformations of the house to a rectilinear shape (148), the bounding of courtyards (154), and the internal configuration of space (157) all begin in the 7th and early 6th centuries BCE according to Izzet. These facts seem to argue against her claim that the late 6th century was the crucial moment in Etruscan society.

Chapter six deals with the largest category of Etruscan material culture, urban space. The urban environment is defined through the distinctions created by the surfaces of different structures and their arrangement with respect to one another. Izzet discusses a nested series of architectural relationships in an attempt to reveal the Etruscan character of such binary abstractions as public and private, inside and outside, and urban and rural that boundaries create. The smallest or most localized of these architectural relationships is that of houses, which through their shifting forms and locations change the character of urban space from open areas and paths winding between the seemingly arbitrary arrangements of inhabitations to an orthogonal plan of streets bounded by regular building facades. Streets are differentiated from the roads that connect to them not only by their paving and drainage schemes, but in particular by the wall surrounding the city that separates what is inside from what is outside. Beyond the impermeable surface of the wall, the distinction between urban and rural identities is observed more gradually. The “ritual halo” (187) of cemeteries

surrounding the city and the decrease in density of surrounding settlements as one moves away from the city suggest a more fluid spectrum of identities between the poles of “urban” and “rural”.

Izzet concludes her work (Chapter 7) by building upon the foundation of the earlier chapters. She addresses the question of why the late 6th century in Etruria was so transformational. Her answer is cultural contact. Her approach to that answer, however, is important because it gives far greater agency to the Etruscans to construct their own material identities in the context of their “diverse and heterogeneous networks of contacts in the ancient Mediterranean” (216). Moreover, Izzet does not exclude the influence of other Italian societies such as those in Latium / Rome and Umbria in favor of Greek, Carthaginian or Eastern Mediterranean groups when isolating the sources impacting Etruscan social identity. Archaic trade is the mechanism that brought these material influences to Etruria and trade is the model that brings Etruscans into contact with these influences at their source. This final chapter is Izzet at her best (esp., pp. 215-235). After tackling the Hellenocentric bias in previous studies of Mediterranean interactions, she demonstrates the depth of her knowledge of the subject, weaving together a narrative that reclaims Etruscan identity for itself. Using three regions as case studies (Umbria, Samnium, and Latium and Rome), she then turns to consider more local influences and examines how trade within Italy between 1000 and 500 BCE influenced Etruscan society. It is in the context of contact that the Etruscans are drawn to more actively modify their environment in order to distinguish themselves. Izzet’s most important contribution is to wrest the story of the Etruscans from the histories of other archaic societies and describe how these people chose a future for themselves.

How she reaches this worthwhile conclusion, however, deserves more scrutiny.

Surface

As discussed above, Izzet offers the concept of ‘surface’ as a theoretical means to reunite vastly different parts of Etruscan material culture. In this purpose, surface is successful. Indeed, it is too successful. Where does all that unity end? If all objects have surfaces, then all objects, including non-Etruscan objects, are equally united by this theory. As John Muir deftly put it, “When we try to pick up anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe”.⁴ To extend the theory of surface to its logical extent might seem pedantic, but it foregrounds an important issue, namely that to dislodge Etruscan artifacts from

⁴ Muir 1911: 211.

the universe of all material culture requires a preconceived notion of what 'Etruscan' is. That is, if surface is going to be used to unify Etruscan materials and only Etruscan materials, then one must have a means to exclude all other materials to get at the purely Etruscan identities embedded within them. Izzet, however, never defines 'Etruscan' as a term. Because of this, the concept of surface actually serves to mask rather than illuminate the axiomatic definition of Etruscan identity in this book and thus is no better a unifying a principle than the axiom it requires. Whether the problem is simply ignored or is obfuscated by appeal to an abstract concept, in the end the tautology is the same. Etruscan identity is defined as Etruscan because of what we say Etruscan is.

'Surface' is also claimed to have the ability to reunite materials that have been separated by disciplinary boundaries. "It enables us to bridge the unhelpful divide that still exists between art-historical and archaeological materials: the iconography of Greek myth on Etruscan mirrors, for example, can be studied alongside the architecture of funerary monuments" (33). What has separated and continues to separate these studies is not the want of a theoretical principle, but the very real differences of methods that scholars employ as well as the time required to prefect their implementation. All objects do have a surface, but it does not mean they can all be studied in the same way. Even if 'surface' does offer a new metaphor to combine art historical and archaeological materials, this does not relieve the scholar from the burden of learning the methods by which these materials were previously discovered and interpreted. Thus, Izzet claims in the quotation cited above that her "iconographic analysis" of mirrors and her study of funerary architecture are united by 'surface', but the methods she uses to examine each type of material are traditional and discipline-specific in their approach. Furthermore, although the concept of 'surface' aids her discussion of both kinds of evidence within a single argument, it cannot help her come to grips with these divergent forms of data and how different scholars have studied mirrors or conducted architectural analysis in order to make that argument. Surface is theoretical (perhaps even rhetorical), not methodological.

Concept for Cause

The concept of 'surface' is also introduced to serve as a metric for the intensification of surface treatments of objects at the end of the 6th century BCE and the sharper social distinctions these treatments are said to reveal. Modifying the surface of objects was surely one mechanism that helped to define existing social structures and to shape new ones. Etruscans no doubt understood the impact of their choices to be more traditional or more original when they created the material world around themselves. Izzet appears to argue, however, that the

Etruscans understood and acted out this process in same theoretical terms she uses to describe it. Thus, the reader is told that “the overall development of Etruscan domestic architecture must be seen as one driven by Etruscan desires, principally the desire to express the difference between inside and outside though the visible surface of the house” (212). Walls are very good ways to express this difference, but certainly their ability to support a roof and provide shelter was paramount to the builders and inhabitants.

Earlier in the book Izzet argues that Etruscans used domestic architecture as “an elaboration of the desire to draw a shaper distinction between house and non-house” (151). In other sections where the term ‘non-house’ is used, it appears that what is meant is that domestic architecture was changing to effect a clearer distinction between public and private (e.g., 149, 154). Yet, ‘non-house’ is continually employed (149, 151, 153, 154) as a motivation for “deliberate expression” (154), leading the reader to conclude that Etruscan house builders had in their minds, at least in part, the active rejection of the idea ‘non-house’ when designing and building domestic architecture. What seems to be occurring here is that Izzet has confused, at least in her writing, an abstract concept for a historical cause. The concept of using the elaboration of the surfaces of houses to build an abstract scale for comparison across space and time is conflated and confused with the intentions and historical realities (e.g., costs, “keeping up with the Jones’ ”) that Etruscans themselves had for their homes, which caused those buildings to be constructed in the forms that they took. Etruscans had specific, conscious ideas as well as more general, unconscious pressures influencing the production of domestic architecture, but “non-house”—a term that encompasses *everything* but houses—was surely not one of them.

Structure

In the world that Izzet paints for us, the Etruscans are unusually acutely aware of the symbolic regimes in which they are embedded, (over-) actively reproducing, rejecting or reinventing those regimes in every choice they made. Such awareness is the product of her theoretical stance; it is Izzet’s explicit goal to illustrate the processes by which Etruscans actively constructed their material realities as a counterbalance to the structurally over-determined explanations of change previously offered (Chapter 1). The revised history presented, however, suffers from the opposite problem; it is structurally under-determined. That is, while the importance of past decisions on future decisions is acknowledged, it is not given any real explanative power as an active and balancing influence in ancient daily life. No agency is emphasized in those decisions that produced traditional, non-innovative forms of material culture, though these choices must

always be the vast majority (lest there be no trends to identify). Indeed at some point, when the novelty of an object wears off, choosing becomes habitual and agency becomes structure.

A related concern is that the times preceding the period of transition culminating in the late 6th century BCE are treated as mere backdrops, devoid of their own active agents. For example, despite her admission of the paucity of gender-defining objects, Izzet draws a (near-) negative conclusion from negative evidence when she claims there was “a great deal of ambiguity towards gender relations in early Etruscan society” (85). She reaches this conclusion about the Iron Age and Orientalizing period by comparing the mixtures of gender specific objects in tombs of these periods with the well-segregated grave offerings in later archaic burials. It is just as plausible (though I’m not espousing this idea) that the mix of gender-specific grave goods represents those giving gifts (and sometimes their gender as well) rather than the recipient of them (in this case the deceased). Such an idea of earlier gender ambiguity is unconvincing on its own merit, but loses further credibility for both its use as a straw man in later discussions and because it ignores Izzet’s own call for agency in the production of gender. Similarly, in the discussion of the earliest forms of Etruscan cities, huts are described as having been built in a “spontaneous manner” and “were arranged in an arbitrary fashion in relation to one another” (174). Only five pages earlier, however, in detailing the theories that express why social norms can be read out of the physical framework of the urban environment, the reader is told that “adjustments to the frame are never arbitrary or random” (169). In order to make her argument, Izzet contradicts her own theoretical stance, creating a world in two acts: a past of all structure and a future of all agency.

Beyond these theoretical concerns, there are throughout the book problems surrounding the transparency of evidence. Of course the uneven nature of Etruscan archaeology is not Izzet’s fault, but it is her problem. More explicit discussions of each data set would have gone a long way towards addressing that issue. In particular, explaining the details of her methodologies would have improved the arguments. For example, how was the “iconographic analysis” (59) of the mirrors accomplished? How were the measurements of tombs taken and what were the criteria for inclusion or exclusion from the sample? The absence of a methodological discussion regarding the integration of the results of different archaeological surveys is most problematic. Izzet stresses these difficulties in the Etruscan archaeological surveys (199), but then simply compiles the data into a table and gets on with interpreting the results. Without a clear discussion the reader has to ferret out from the interpretation that 40% (2 of 5 surveys) of the data cannot support her conclusions about the change in settlement hierarchies

because one survey did not include data for earlier periods (Albegna Valley) and the other covered too small an area (Tuscania). But even these concessions about the data miss the mark. It is not that the data are divided into different chronological ranges that make them difficult to integrate with one another. Rather, it is the differing strategies of conducting the survey and producing the results that matter most. The absence of such discussions makes the conclusions impossible to evaluate and therefore tempting to dismiss.

In the end, *The Archaeology of Etruscan Society* provides the reader an interesting tour through aspects of the social lives of the Etruscans. The book is well written — a necessity for such theory-laden language — and is largely devoid of errors⁵ and other infelicities.⁶ The bibliography, which comes to 72 pages, is a very useful resource for Etruscan scholars; it brings together in one place much of the most recent research and original excavation reports. Each chapter outlines a problem and then covers the history of scholarship concerning that problem as well as the theoretical approaches (acknowledged and otherwise) that those scholars employed. Izzet's answers to these issues seek out the Etruscan response to situations and in the end find their increasing contacts with the wider Mediterranean world to be the motor that powered their desire for greater self-distinction and to express that evolving notion of 'Etruscan' in material culture.

Some archaeologists will find this book to be overly theoretical and to be lacking a robust empirical foundation. Many of those same archaeologists will likely also have (unlike Izzet) large and commensurate data sets available to them. Many theory-minded archaeologists will find themselves sympathetic to the volume's approach but dissatisfied with the argumentation. Ultimately, the volume is a valuable contribution that suffers from two deficiencies. The first is that as novel and useful as her theoretical approach is it has flaws in its application, most notably in the discussion of 'surface'. Secondly, the over-application of these theories compels Izzet to think past her subjects, forcing the Etruscans to act out her theoretical categories rather than illuminating their own historical choices.

⁵ Chart 3.1 and Table 6.1 are absent from illustration list.

⁶ I note the tendency to quote Italian phrases that seem to add little or nothing for having been left in Italian, e.g., "relative parità sociale" (150); "età del cristallizzazione" (205), etc.

REFERENCES

- BOURDIEU, PIERRE. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- DEMARRAIS, ELIZABETH, LUIS CASTILLO & TIMOTHY EARLE. 1996. Ideology, materialization and power strategies. *Current Anthropology* 37.15–31.
- EARLE, TIMOTHY. 1997. *How Chiefs Come to Power. The Political Economy in Prehistory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- GIDDENS, ANTHONY. 1979. *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*. London: Macmillan.
- MUIR, JOHN. *My First Summer in the Sierra*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- PREZIOSI, DONALD (ed.). 1998. *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Department of Classics
539 Herter Hall
University of Massachusetts Amherst
Amherst, MA 01003
epoehler@classics.umass.edu